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The Visit of the Magi

Matthew 2: 1-12

The visit of the Magi DIG: Why was it important that Jesus be born in Bethlehem? From whom did the magi learn about the King of the Jews? What was this star? Where did they learn about it? Why did they follow it? Who was King Herod? What was he like? In light of the prophecy in Matthew 2:6, why was he so concerned that the Child be found? What do the star, the magi, the gifts, the worship, and prophecy tell us about the nature and significance of the Messiah?

REFLECT: In your journey toward God, how are you like these magi? Unlike them? Have you had to leave anything to follow Jesus? What did you leave behind? Was it worth it? What are the gold, frankincense and myrrh in your life? How have you responded to Yeshua?

The purpose of **Matthew's** gospel is to present **Jesus** as **the King of the Jews**. Through a carefully selected series of quotations from the TaNaKh, **Mattityahu** documents **Yeshua's** claim to be **the** long-awaited **Messiah**. Consequently, the first thing **he** needs to establish is that **Yeshua** of Nazareth was born where **the Meshiach** *must* be born - in the town of **Bethlehem**. **He** explains how it was in fact the birthplace of **Christ**, even though later events would dictate **His** relocation to Nazareth in Galilee.

Jesus was born between 7 and 6 BC. The reason **He** was born BC, or *Before Christ*, is that Dionysius Exiguus, the sixth-century monk who set up the modern calendar, made a mistake in determining the date which was not corrected until later. Instead of the terms AS, or *Anno Domini*, meaning *in the year of [the] Lord Jesus*, and BC, the Jewish community normally represents these time periods by using CE, or *Common Era*, and BCE, *Before the Common Era*, to avoid using a dating system that points to **Yeshua** as **the Meshiach**.¹⁴³

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, Joseph and **Mary** evidently decided to continue to stay and live in the town of their ancestry. Two years later,

during the reign of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked repeatedly: Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews (Mt 2:1-2a)? The word **asked** is a present participle, emphasizing continuous action. **They** kept on asking and asking. **They** had calculated exactly how many years would transpire before **the Messiah** would come (**Dani’el 9:24-27**). Although **they** were familiar with the book of **Dani’el** and the book of **Numbers**, **they** were, however, not familiar with the book of **Micah**, where in **Micah 5:2** it predicted that **the Meshiach** would **be born** in the town of **Beit-Lechem**. As a result, **they came to Yerushalayim** because **they** were desperate to find **Him**.

Around Christmas time, the nativity scenes are put up and they all look about the same. There is a little hut to represent a barn, and within it there are three people: **Miryam**, Joseph and the baby **Jesus** in a manger, or a feeding trough for cattle. Facing them are three shepherds on one side and three **magi** on the other. The whole scene is really unbiblical because the shepherds and the **magi** never saw each other because **they** were separated by about two years.

There are several misconceptions in the common nativity scene as well. First, is the very popular Christmas song that begins with, “We three kings of Orient are.” There is no way of knowing how many there were. The Bible merely mentions **them** in the plural. There could have been two, twenty or a hundred. We don’t really know. The second misconception is that **they** were kings. **They** were not kings, but **magi** or astrologers from **the east**. Why would those Gentile astrologers want to worship a Jewish **king**? These were **magi** from Babylon. In the past, **Dani’el** had saved the lives of all **the magi of Babylon** by interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (see my commentary on [Jeremiah, to see link click Dq - Nebuchadnezzar’s Troubling Dream](#)). The source of **Dani’el’s** ability was not the stars of the heavens but the **God** of Heaven. As a result, a line of Babylonian astrologers spanning generations worshipped **the One true God**, and having **Dani’el’s** prophecy, looked forward to the coming of **the King of the Jews**. We can conclude from the book of **Dani’el** that Babylonian astrologers did know the time **Messiah** was to be born. But **Dani’el** says nothing about **a star** that would proclaim the birth of **the King of the Jews**. So how did **the magi** know about it?

Balaam, another Babylonian astrologer prophesied that: **A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will arise out of Isra’el (Numbers 24:17). Traditional Jewish sources have long regarded this verse as referring to the coming of the Messiah (Tractate Taanit IV.8; Targum Onkelos).** But it is not a literal **star** because the **star** and the **scepter** in this verse are one and the same. We

know this because Balaam's prophecy is in the form of Hebrew poetry, which is not based on rhythm or rhyme but on parallelism. The term **scepter** is a symbol of royalty or kingship. This **star** that would **come out of Jacob**, would be a **King Himself**.

Furthermore, Balaam's occupation was that of an astrologer. Even more significant is that he came from Pethor, a city on the banks of the Euphrates River in Babylonia (**Numbers 22:5; Deuteronomy 23:4**). With the book of **Dani'el** and the prophecy of Balaam, we have a double Babylonian connection. Therefore, the revelation of a **star** in relation to **Meshiach's** birth came by means of a Babylonian astrologer who, no doubt, passed the information down to his colleagues. Centuries later, **Dani'el** was able to give further details to the Babylonian astrologers about the time that **the star of Jacob** would appear.¹⁴⁴



These **magi** said that **they saw His star when it rose and had come to worship** (Greek: *proskuneo*, meaning to kiss the face) **Him (Mattityahu 2:2b)**. The Greek word translated **star** is *aster*, and means *light, radiance or brilliance*. What **they** saw was the Sh'khinah glory, or the visible manifestation of **God**. There are five reasons why this could not be a literal **star**. First, it was uniquely **the Messiah's star** because it is called **His star**. In that way, it is not true of any other **star**. Second, this **star** appears and disappears. Third, this **star** moves from east to west, from Babylon to **the holy City of David**. Fourth, it moves from north to south, from **Yerushalayim to Bethlehem**. Fifth, it hovers over the very **house** where **the child** was living. A literal **star** cannot hover in one place. **So, just as the Sh'khinah glory was used to announce the birth of the King of the Jews to Jewish shepherds, it was also used to announce the birth of the King of the Jews to Gentile astrologers** (see my commentary on **Genesis [Lw](#) - The Witness of the Stars**).¹⁴⁵

Without condemning astrology, **Matthew's** gospel challenges **his** Jewish audience about their prejudice against outsiders to their faith (also see **Mathew 8:5-13** and **15:21-28**). **His** inspired message communicates that even Gentiles may respond to

Yeshua if given the opportunity (**Jonah 1:13-16, 3:6 through 4:1 and 10-11**).¹⁴⁶ They, unlike the Jews, prove receptive to **the King** and **God's** purposes for **Him**.¹⁴⁷

Several years after the Jewish shepherds had worshiped **the Messiah** in a cave in **Jerusalem**, the very presence of **God, His Sh'khinah** glory, appeared in the eastern sky (**Matthew 2:9**). It was seen by many, but followed by few. **The magi** were probably excited to see it for **they** remembered Balaam's prophecy and knew its true meaning. **They** immediately loaded up **their** precious **gifts** and turned **their** plodding camels toward *the brilliance*. **They** traveled almost a thousand miles across the sands of the desert, with the rising sun behind **them**. They pitched **their** tents by day and mounted again when the evening sky turned deep blue, following the *radiance* along the rim of sky and earth. It was a long hard trip by camel, probably over a year. **They** eventually came through the passes of Moab into Jericho, where the Dead Sea and the River Jordan meet, and **they** crossed the river and went up into **the City of David**.



When **they** came into **Jerusalem** the **magi** probably desired to speak to someone in the Temple. After entering through the Huldah Gate, **they** entered the massive 500 cubit square Temple Mount. After some dozen meters **they** came to the dividing wall of partition, which ensured complete separation between Jews and Gentiles (**Ephesians 2:14**). It consisted of a low wall of 75cm upon which a wooden see-through fence of 52.5cm was secured (see the commentary on **Acts Cn - Paul's Advice from Jacob and the Elders at Jerusalem**). It was built low and allowed a view through so that no one, not even a child, might be prevented from seeing the glorious view of the golden Sanctuary.¹⁴⁸

So, there **they** stood - looking through the fence for a Levitical priest on the other side. One happened to be walking by and **they** asked, "Where is the **Child King of the Jews**? We have come to worship **Him**?" It stands to reason that although **the magi** would be happy and expectant, the priest would not share their joy. "If **the Meshiach** had returned," the Levite probably reasoned to himself, "**He** would not reveal **Himself** to Gentiles, but to the Jews . . . to the high priest himself!" The high priest was possibly summoned with **the magi** explaining when **they** had seen and **their** interpretation of the happy sign. But, he knew of no such sign. How could it be true? Surely if anyone would know it would be him! But, as a mark of respect, he probably detailed the beliefs of the Jews concerning **the Messiah** and **Bethlehem** was mentioned.

The magi may have thought that this was the most promising clue since the *brilliance* **they** had seen was close overhead. **Beit-Lechem**, five miles to the south of **the Holy City** would be a good place to go. **They** probably thanked the high priest and camped outside the walls for the night because **they** were very tired from **their** travels. **They** would head for **Bethlehem** the next afternoon. But, more than likely the high priest did not wait until morning, he reported to the place of **King Herod** and relayed the news.

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him (Mattityahu 2:3). This is one of the great understatements in the Bible. **He** should have been called **Herod** the Paranoid instead of **Herod** the Great. **He** was cruel and merciless. **He** was incredibly jealous, suspicious and afraid of any royal rival. Fearing a potential threat, **he** had his high priest, who was **his** wife Mariamne's brother, drowned in what turned out to be a rather shallow pool (**Josephus War 1.437**). Then **he** provided a magnificent funeral and pretended to weep. Later, **he** had Mariamne herself killed, then her mother and two of **his** own sons, Alexander and Aristobulus were wrongly strangled to death for supposedly plotting against **him** (**Josephus Ant. 16.394; War 1.665-65**). Five days before **his** death (about a year after **Jesus** was born), **he** had a third son murdered. **Herod** was a supposed convert to Judaism so **he** did not eat pork. Small wonder the great Roman emperor Caesar Augustus was rumored to have openly said of **Herod**, "It was safer to be **Herod's** sow (*huos*) than **Herod's** son (*huios*)."¹⁴⁹

One of the greatest evidences of **his** bloodthirstiness and insane cruelty was having the most distinguished citizens of **Tziyon** arrested and imprisoned shortly before **his** death. Because **he** knew no one would mourn **his** own death, **he** gave orders that those distinguished citizens should be executed the moment **he** died, to

guarantee that there would be mourning in **Yerushalayim (Josephus Ant. 17.174-79; War 1.659-60)**.¹⁵⁰ Fortunately **his** orders were not carried out. As a result, **when he was disturbed, all Jerusalem was disturbed with him**. The citizens of **the City** feared revenge from this heartless and cunning tyrant.

The prominent role of **Herod** in the story prepares us for **his** political holocaust in the next file (see **Aw - Herod Gave Orders to Kill all the Boys in Bethlehem Two Years Old and Under**). The Jewish reader could hardly fail to see the connection between **Herod** and Pharaoh in the time of Moshe. Pharaoh's infanticide threatened to destroy Isra'el's future deliverer (see my commentary on **Exodus Ah - The Hebrew Midwives in Egypt**), while **Herod's** holocaust threatened to destroy Israel's future **Savior**. Moshe's escape from the slaughter and his subsequent exile and return when **all the men who wanted to kill you are dead (Exodus 4:19)**, reminds us of **Yeshua's** exile and return **for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead (Matthew 2:20)**. This typology between Moses the deliverer and **Jesus the Messiah** runs throughout **Mattityahu's** gospel and its solid foundation has been firmly laid here from the outset.¹⁵¹

Herod was always fearful of conspiracies against **him** and **he** suspected another conspiracy. No other **king** would be allowed to take **his** place no matter who **He** was. **We see the three basic responses that mankind demonstrate when confronted with Jesus when He was on the earth. These are the same three responses throughout human history.**

The first response is anger and hostility as seen by Herod. Then the mad **king**, in frantic fear, **called together all the people's chief priests and Torah-teachers**. As a secular man, **he** knew little about Jewish prophecies. **The chief priests** were not a particular category, but were composed of various leading influential **priests**, including the leaders of the daily and weekly course of **priests**, the Temple treasurer, and other Temple overseers and officials. Together with the high priest and captain of the guard, they formed the priestly aristocracy often loosely referred to as **the chief priests**. For the most part, these **chief priests** were **Sadducees**, whereas, the regular **priests** were **Pharisees**. **The Torah-teachers** were **scribes**, primarily **Pharisees**, who were the authorities on **the Torah**, the Oral Law (see **Ei - The Oral Law**), and were the most important scholars of Judaism.¹⁵² But, the relations between **Herod** and **the chief priests** were not cordial and **he** really had to swallow **his** pride (which was a heaping spoon

full) to even ask for **their** help. **He** despised **them** - and **they** hated **him**. But, **he** was desperate.

The second response is indifference as seen in the chief priests and teachers of the Torah. He inquired from them where the Messiah was to be born. The imperfect tense of **inquire** suggests that **he** kept on asking and asking and asking. **Matthew's** interest is specifically in the birthplace of **Christ**, which was also what **the magi** wanted to know. When **Herod** asked, **they** did not have to look up the answer. **They** already knew it was in **Micah 5:2** because it was a messianic prophecy. But, **the Sadducees** showed no interest in the possibility of their **Messiah's** birth. They had more fear of **Herod** and for their own lives than courage in protecting **him** from some rumor of a **child king**.¹⁵³ In any case, **the chief priests and the scribes** told **Herod** what **he** wanted to know. **Christ** should be born **in Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet Micah had written (Mattityahu 2:4-5)**. **They** had head knowledge about **Messiah** . . . but no relationship.

There are four ways that the New Covenant quotes the TaNaKh and one is found in this section - a literal prophecy and a literal fulfillment. The literal prophecy is found in **Micah 5:2** where it reads: **But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come from Me, One who will be ruler over Isra'el, whose origins are from old, from ancient times.** The literal fulfillment came when **Christ** was **born in Bethlehem**.¹⁵⁴ **Matthew** wrote: **But you, Beit-Lechem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler, who will shepherd My people Isra'el" (Matthew 2:6).** **Mattityahu's** quotation, while keeping the integrity of **Micah 5:2**, is in fact a more direct reflection of **Second Samuel 5:2**. Both of these passages from the TaNaKh are closely related. The **Second Samuel** passage gives **God's** original call to David; while the **Micah** passage describes the coming messianic reign of **Yeshua**, David's future descendant. **The Holy Spirit** inspired **Matthew** to combine these two passages to better suit **his** purpose and audience of portraying **Jesus as King of the Jews**.

But, that is not the only change **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** made. **He** also changed the archaic title of **Bethlehem Ephrathah**, to the more specific **Bethlehem, in the land of Judah**. This emphasized **Jesus' Judean origins**, and was vital for **Matthew** to link **Christ's** birth to **Bethlehem**, rather than Nazareth. In addition, **Micah** described **Beit-Lechem** as **small among the clans of Judah**, but

Matthew claims it is **by no means least among the rulers of Judah**. Therefore, **Micah's** words are not at odds with **Mattityahu's** gospel.¹⁵⁵

The next morning, **Herod secretly found the magi** camped outside **the City** walls. **He found out from them the exact time the radiance had appeared** because **he** probably assumed that **the child** was born at **the exact time** the **star** appeared. **He sent them to Bethlehem** saying: **Go and search carefully for the child**. The term **Herod** uses for **child** is a Greek term *paidion*, which refers to a **child** that is at least one year old. **As soon as you find Him, Herod** said coyly: **report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him (Mattityahu 2:7-8)**.¹⁵⁶

But, it was ironic, as **Herod** agonized and gazed toward **Bethlehem**, that **Yeshua** had been right under **his** nose all along. Twice before, **Yosef** and **Miryam** had brought **their** young **son** to **Jerusalem**. The first visit came only eight days after **Jesus'** birth so that **He** might be circumcised (see **At - On the Eighth Day, When it was Time to Circumcise Him, He was Named Jesus**). At that time **the child** was formally named **Yeshua**, in keeping with the prophecy. The second visit came when **He** was forty-one-days old. The baby **Jesus** was brought to the Temple and formally dedicated to **ADONAI** (see **Au - Jesus Presented in the Temple**). Perhaps if **Herod** the paranoid had known the messianic threat had been so close - literally, less than six hundred yards from **his** throne room - **his** torment could have been relieved. But, **Jesus** and **His** parents were just three more bodies making their way through the noisy bazaars and narrow, twisting streets *en route* to the Temple that day.¹⁵⁷

After the magi had heard the king, they rested until the afternoon then **they went on their way**. **They** assumed that **Herod** was sincere and wanted to worship **the king of the Jews** once they found **Him**. **The magi** waited until the Sh'khinah glory came up, east of **Yerushalayim**, and then, **they** mounted **their** camels and followed it the final few miles. **They** stared out on the north side of **Jerusalem**, where there was a bazaar for Gentiles, and passed the Gate of Damascus and went across the swift-flowing brook Kidron to a little place called Gethsemane, then south toward the Valley of ben Hinnom and on up the winding road near the potters field and straight south to **Bethlehem**.

The *radiance* seemed to move before **them**, as stars do when **people** travel, but when they approached **Beit-Lechem** the Sh'khinah glory reappeared **and went ahead of them until it stopped**, or literally *took its stand, over the place where the Child was (Matthew 2:9)*. **When they saw the** Sh'khinah glory,

they were overjoyed (Mattityahu 2:10). It seems as though **Matthew** was almost at a loss for words to describe their excitement.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with His mother Mary (Matthew 2:11a). By this time **Yosef and Mary** were living in a **house**, not a stable or a cave. The shepherds found the baby **Jesus** in a cave; however **the magi** found **Yeshua** in a private **house**. **Jesus** is called a **child**, or *paidion*, here, rather than a newborn **baby**, or *brephos* (**Luke 2:12**). Once again, **He** was about two years old at this time. Evidently after giving birth to **Yeshua** in **Bethlehem, Joseph and Miryam** decided to remain where **their** family had originated from, rather than going back to Nazareth. The silence concerning **Yosef**, however, points to **Mary** as being the central figure in the narrative.

The third response is to worship Him as seen by the magi. And they bowed down and worshiped Him as the Messiah (Mt 2:11b). The Jewish shepherds were the first ones to worship **Him** as **the Savior**, but this was the first Gentile worship of the Jewish **King**. It is important to note that when **they saw the child Messiah they bowed down and worshiped** (Greek: *proskuneo*, meaning *to kiss the face*) **Him**. If there ever was a time when **Mary** could have been **worshiped**, this was it. But **they** didn't worship **her** - **they worshiped Him**.¹⁵⁸



Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts. The giving of **gifts** in the East is very significant. Hardly any transaction of importance can take place without a **gift**. Consequently, **they** appropriately presented the royal **child with gifts**, all of which have tremendous significance from the TaNaKh.

Gold symbolized His royalty (see **Genesis 41:4; First Kings 10:1-13**, etc), and pointed to the fact that **Jesus** is a **King**. **Gold** was used extensively in the building of the Temple (**First Kings 6-9; Second Chronicles 2-4**). **Matthew** constantly

presents **Christ** as **King**, and here we see the **King of the Jews, the King of kings**, fittingly being presented with royal **gifts** of **gold**.

Frankincense symbolized His deity. It came from Southern Arabia and Somalia, was an expensive perfume, burned not only in worship but also at important social occasions (**Song of Songs 3:6**). In the TaNaKh, it was stored in a special chamber in front of the Temple and was sprinkled on certain offerings as a symbol of **the people's** desire to please **ADONAI**.¹⁵⁹ (see my commentary on **Exodus Fp - The Altar of Incense in the Sanctuary: Christ, Our Advocate with the Father**).

And myrrh symbolized His humanity (Matthew 2:11c). Mixed with other spices, it was used in the preparation of bodies for burial (**John 19:39**). It had several other uses as well. Mixed with wine it was used as an anesthetic (**Mark 15:23**) and it was also used as a luxurious cosmetic fragrance (**Esther 2:12; Psalm 45:8; Proverbs 7:17 and Song of Songs 1:13, 5:1 and 5**). It reminds us of the ministry that **the man-God, the God-man**, came to do: die as the final sacrifice for sin (**Hebrews 10:10-18**).

Isaiah prophesied that the Gentile nations will bring the wealth of the world to **Isra'el** during the messianic Kingdom: **Herds and camels will cover your Land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and frankincense and proclaiming the praise of ADONAI (Isaiah 60:6)**. When **the magi** came to worship the royal **Child in Bethlehem** they brought **gifts** with **them**. But what **gift** is left out at **Messiah's** Second Coming that we see in **Isaiah's** passage? **Myrrh!** They do not bring **myrrh** because it speaks of death. When **Christ** comes again, nothing will speak of **His** death. **Gold** will point to **His** kingship, and **frankincense** will point to **His** deity. But, there will be no **myrrh** because **He** had already died upon a cross for the sins of the world. **He** will come as **the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the KING of kings and LORD of lords** to rule and reign forever (**Revelation 5:5 and 19:16**).¹⁶⁰

That very night, **the magi** were **warned in a dream not to go back to Herod** with the news of finding **the Messiah**. The use of dreams as a means of divine communication is seen in **Gen 28:12, 31:11; Num 16:6; 1 Kings 3:5 and Job 33:14-16; Mt 1:20-23, 2:13, 19-20, 22**. They were not told why; however, **Herod** would have killed the **child** if **they** had not been warned to go back **to their own country by a different route**. Already in this passage we see a motif that occurs throughout the gospels: the presence of **the Messiah** demands decision and thus causes division between those who accept **Him** and those who reject **Him**.¹⁶¹

The role of **the magi** in **Matthew's** gospel is now complete and they set off for home. But, **their** route home, no less than **their** arrival, is supernaturally directed by **God**.¹⁶² In the morning **they** probably agreed that, although it would be wrong to ignore the invitation of **Herod** to return to **Jerusalem**, it would be even worse to ignore the warning of an angel in **a dream**. So, **they** packed **their** tents and belongings, mounted **their** camels, and **returned to their country by another route** instead (**Mattityahu 2:12**). **They** went north towards **the daughter of Tziyon (Jeremiah 6:2)**, headed east through Mar Saba, then north to Jericho and back across to Babylon.¹⁶³ **They** would stay out of **Herod's** sight and domain altogether.

Scripture records nothing else of these grateful visitors from **the east**. But, blessed as **they** were, **they** surely must have witnessed about **Christ** in **their own country**. Because **they** were astrologers to **kings**, the news of **Yeshua** probably became well known in the courts of the East as it one day would become in the **palace** of Caesar (**Philippians 1:13** and **4:22**).

ADONAI, thank **You** for sending **Your Son** to be with us, and to die for us; **Yeshua**, thank **You** for being my personal **Savior**; **Ruach**, open my eyes to the wonderful truth of the gospel. May I be amazed daily by **Your** grace. May I walk in **Your** power. May I have courage and joy to share the Good News **of Immanuel, God with us (Isaiah 7:14)**.